

STRENGTHENING DISASTER RECOVERY FOR THE NATION

Preliminary Summary of Emerging Themes - November 13, 2009

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Background

Since October, DHS/FEMA has hosted ten virtual teleconferences and five stakeholder forums to solicit input on best practices for long-term community disaster recovery. Additionally, more than four-hundred people have responded to the sixteen questions via www.DisasterRecoveryWorkingGroup.gov. This input will guide the development of the draft *National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF)* and the *White House Working Group Report to the President*. Participants in the teleconferences, forums, and website include representatives from federal state and local government agencies, tribal representatives, representatives from the faith-based and nonprofit community, stakeholders from the private sector, and academics and researchers. The VTCs, forums, and website are the first step in an open and collaborative approach to the development of the NDRF.

VTC, Forum, and website participants were given the opportunity to respond to sixteen (16) questions about disaster recovery practices and organization. Questions explored issues such as successful recovery, long term community recovery best practices, the roles and responsibilities of recovery agencies and the public, and the coordination of recovery efforts.

It is important to note that this is a preliminary summary based on inputs observed and analyzed from the ten (10) VTCs, two (2) of the five (5) stakeholder forums, and website responses through November 9th. As more data is received and analyzed a more complete and comprehensive picture of the themes and concepts will emerge.

In terms of the methodology used to draft this preliminary summary, participant comments per each of the 16 questions were carefully reviewed with a focus on identifying key ideas and themes. Additionally, VTC and Forum facilitators provided their written impressions of emergent themes for each session. Wherever possible and appropriate, similar ideas of different participants were grouped together to aid in their comprehension and flow. Based on this interim review, we observed ten (10) major themes on long-term post-disaster community recovery. These ideas are presented with no hierarchy of importance.

Need for Goal Setting and a Broadly Applicable Definition of Recovery

- Participants felt that the current understanding of “disaster recovery” is murky at best and requires a thoughtful and consistent definition. Ideas expressed at the event suggested that recovery be thought of as the equilibrium of physical (infrastructure), social (people), and environmental (natural) community elements. Sustainability and resiliency were deemed important to the group, although these terms also need clear definitions. Other suggestions included the definition of recovery be tied to the recovery of the tax base and/or the ability of the community to function without government assistance.
- Participants stated that successful long-term recovery can be measured by the time it takes for people and businesses to return to their community and regain a sense of “normal” (which must be defined locally). There is both an economic and social aspect of recovery.

- Participants often stated that communities meeting the challenge of disasters, especially catastrophic disasters, are likely facing a “new normal” when contemplating their post-disaster futures. In fact, participants think it is desirable that recovery can result in more than a replication of the original community footprint. Opportunities within recovery for rebuilding in environmentally-friendly ways and that incorporate new technologies and mitigation initiatives to build resiliency, can result in post-disaster communities exceeding pre-disaster conditions. Participants want to see opportunities for mitigation integrated with preparedness, response and recovery efforts, including through “incentivized,” funding to encourage the application of mitigation techniques, maximizing recovery effectiveness.
- Participants say recovery assistance needs to be “smart money” to help and improve lives. Participants expressed that building back to conditions that exceed pre-disaster conditions is optimal. Incorporating mitigation techniques into recovery strategies is a hallmark of successful recoveries. Improving resiliency: human, economic and environmental resiliency are desired outcomes. To achieve “building back better” requires a mobilization of experts to get more skilled operatives on the ground.

Recognizing Benefits of Both Pre-Disaster Planning and Post-Disaster Recovery Planning

- Pre-disaster planning greatly improves a community’s ability to successfully recover from a disaster. By identifying available resources, roles and responsibilities, State, Tribal and Local officials will better know how to leverage assistance and how to coordinate with private and non-profit partners to maximize available resources.
- Training and exercises as part of the pre-disaster planning can be a useful tool to review and improve these plans while giving participants a chance to better understand their role in recovery operations and have proven to be very effective in response planning.
- Successful post-disaster recovery planning requires the community to gather public input in order to set recovery goals and priorities. To maximize public involvement and support, the planning process needs to start soon after the event and should not be rushed. With demonstrable public approval, recovery projects become eligible for private and non-profit funding. A successful long term recovery planning effort can result in a community not only getting back to where it started but also developing new economic opportunities, making improvements to infrastructure and being better prepared for future disasters.

Better Partnerships through inclusion and coordination

- Federal, state, local and tribal governments need a good framework for partnership that is inclusive of all players. All populations should have a voice in an inclusive community planning process.
- Partnership is needed not only at the governmental level, but it should also extend out to the private and non-profit sectors. In the non-profit sectors, this should include faith-based organizations, volunteering agencies, as well as private and corporate foundations. The Faith-based communities and local volunteers, in particular, offer local knowledge and can better identify community needs and direct resources accordingly. The private sector and nonprofits should be included in recovery efforts. It has been noted that the working relationship with tribes has some shortcomings and therefore needs improvements.

- Effort must be made also to ensure that all segments of a community are included in the recovery planning effort and considerations. For instance, efforts to solicit inputs and ideas from individuals with special needs or members of a vulnerable community will help ensure that their interests and concerns are included in the recovery planning and implementation.
- Disasters require the cooperation of levels of government that normally do not interact frequently. For example, in a disaster, federal agencies often work directly with local governments; this new relationship requires a new organizational structure.
- Participants stated that the responsibilities of agencies at all levels of government, and nonprofits, should be defined. This definition would aid in accountability and efficiency, and reduce program overlap.
 - Currently many agencies have recovery programs that have overlapping missions as well as similar, but not identical, application processes. Participants repeatedly pointed out how difficult and time-consuming it is to apply for funding after a disaster. An inter-agency common application process for federal post-disaster funding would save money and time for applicants.
 - Coordination should also extend to how programs and policies can work together to maximize their effectiveness to improve delivery and address gaps and overlaps. Currently the federal response to long term community recovery is fragmented.
- Also, closer coordination with the private sector, especially small businesses, was expressed as a means to more effectively reestablish the vitality of the business community. Leadership was identified as a key component to integrate these partnerships. It was noted that it will be a challenge to ensure the process is open to new players beyond the traditional partners. The involvement of new players is encouraged since new resources may be unique to a specific recovery.

Efficient Recovery Process through Effective Communication

- Participants repeatedly stressed the need for frequent and ongoing communications, constant communication and coordination with statutory responsibilities and effective information sharing. Communication needs to occur in numerous contexts at different points in the recovery process. Participants felt mutual expectations need to be clearly established and a common understanding of goals, Lessons Learned from typical roadblocks to success, and realistic timelines for “the new normal” are important to the success of the process. It was noted that each community wants to feel its unique needs are being addressed and the perceptions need to be managed on multiple levels including Federal, State, Tribal and local.
- Public outreach and involvement is important. Public input ‘at the table’ with the government is deemed necessary. A town-hall style of meeting has also been recommended to get public input. Partnering with other programs such as SBA, USDA, DOT etc is also recommended.

Effective Leadership is Necessary for Recovery

- Participants felt that long-term recovery was dependent upon effective State, Federal and local leadership from the FCO level and above. Leadership must be visible, encourage recovery planning efforts, ensure the right people are “at the table” to discuss recovery, identify and

facilitate needed relationships, encourage “out of the box” thinking, and message that recovery is a team initiative.

- Participants spoke about the complexity of recovery operations when so many different agencies are involved. An organizational leader is needed to keep things flowing smoothly. This leader should facilitate collaboration among the various partners and stakeholders and serve as a convener to coordinate all of the key stakeholders.

Disaster Recovery Program & Funding Issues and Improvement

- Many participants were unhappy with the FEMA Public Assistance program. Specifically, people cited problems with delivery, timeliness, complex requirements, and restrictive eligibility guidelines.
- Funds should be made available quickly. The importance of the timeliness of funding was an overarching theme of forum participants.
- Nonprofits should be supported financially. Nonprofits or private sector entities working on disaster recovery should have adequate funding mechanisms. It was noted that these groups play large roles in recovery efforts, especially as the initial federal response scales down. Local nonprofits have the additional advantage of understanding local needs and being able to maintain contact with a community for an indefinite period after a disaster.

Establish a systematic approach for ensuring accountability, flexibility and ongoing effectiveness of disaster assistance programs and policies

- Stakeholders point to the need to recognize that successful disaster recovery is a multi-year, complex, and evolving process that does not end with the closing of a Federal Joint Field Office.
- It is critical that recovery assistance programs and policies initially put into play to support a local recovery effort not only be monitored for meeting the typical regulatory compliance requirements, but that they are also regularly assessed for ongoing effectiveness in meeting their intended objectives and performance goals (i.e., the right amount of assistance is still getting to the right people at the right time), and be periodically adjusted to meet unmet or changing recovery needs.
- Stakeholders also point to the frustrations of repeating the same mistakes due to the lack of best practices and lessons-learned being identified and shared from one disaster to another disaster recovery mission.
- Hence, a person or office should be made responsible for capturing and sharing lessons learned and best practices with other recovery operations both present and future.

Integration of Mitigation Measures and Resiliency into the Recovery Process

- Participants repeatedly stated that mitigation against future disasters should be an integral part of the recovery process. The current FEMA hazard mitigation program is generally seen positively; some participants would like to see the program expanded.
- Most participants felt that the best time to incorporate mitigation measures was as part of a pre-

disaster plan (i.e. a comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance, coastal zone management plan). One participant suggested that a national mitigation policy – a national mitigation plan – is needed.

- Participants felt that a successful recovery would be one in which the community was stronger and less at risk for future disasters. This would also reduce the risk of future claims and therefore be a good investment of public dollars.

Clearly Define Roles & Responsibilities and Addressing the Issue of Local Capacity

- Stakeholders concur that the local government of a disaster impacted community, having in-depth knowledge about its own community and an intimate understanding of the extent of the disaster damage, is more appropriate to lead the recovery process long-term. Also, Stakeholders recognize that the state government can and must play an important supporting – and sometimes co-leading role depending on the extent of the disaster’s impact on the local government’s capability and capacity to launch its recovery.
- However, local governments often may have limited staffing, technical, and financial resources and experience that can be dedicated to planning and implementing their recovery - especially during the period immediately after a disaster.
- Participants discussed the changing needs for coordination of roles and responsibilities as the Federal role transitions to State and local partners. It was noted that side-by-side coordination was especially important.
- Federal assistance should support planning efforts and recovery policies of state and local governments, focused on supplementing – not substituting – local and state capabilities, capacities, and leadership, and with a clear plan of transitioning key recovery responsibilities and roles back to the local and state government as soon as feasible.

Provide Recovery Related Training & Education

- Training and exercises are useful tools to review and improve plans while giving participants a chance to better understand their role in recovery operations and have proven to be very effective in response planning.
- Participants discussed the need for education and outreach in multiple recovery contexts. Participants agreed that an awareness of services available should be promoted at and across all levels (Federal/State/local). It was noted that this would have the added benefit of network building. Education and outreach has the potential to address needed streamlining of grant processes. Furthermore, it was noted that education and outreach were needed to highlight availability, importance and need for funding of post disaster social services.

Emerging Suggestions

What follows are just some of the suggestions participants have voiced under the above 6 themes for improving long-term community disaster recovery. They are provided here for information only and represent only a sample of the suggestions observed. As more data are reviewed, additional emerging suggestions will be included in the next summary.

- Post-disaster planning should be a requirement for Federal assistance and recovery funding to ensure community goals are identified, public stakeholders are involved and that the community

is better prepared to face the future.

- An organizational structure/protocol to facilitate collaboration is needed. Forum participants pointed out that for applicants, the federal disaster response is incomprehensibly complex. An inter-agency organizational structure would simplify and unify the federal response. An organizational structure/protocol to facilitate collaboration is needed.
- Participants stated that the application process should be streamlined. A common application could be used to apply for various federal funding sources. This inter-agency common application process would save money and time for applicants.
- Funding guidelines should be flexible, so as to meet the diverse needs and goals of the disaster applicants. Some felt that a flexible Community Development Block Grant type of funding was the best match for meeting the needs of post-disaster communities. Participants also felt that funding mechanisms should be transparent.
- The scale and need for disaster assistance changes quickly and frequently. A position or office with the appropriate authority and responsibility to scale assistance to the size and scope of the disaster impacted community and needs is required. This function may be carried out by a single person assigned to a small community, or by a large recovery type office with multiple staff responsible for coordinating ongoing assistance, addressing obstacles, and promoting recovery in a large urban area.
- Outreach efforts need to be adequately funded. Most VTC participants felt that public outreach was critical for recovery success. Some of the best practices cited including using pre-existing local nonprofit organizations as outreach partners, and forming media partnerships. Participants repeatedly stated that public outreach (and education) should start pre-disaster. Participants also suggested using social media as a communication tool for information distribution.
- One-stop services, information and training were mentioned by a number of participants.. One-Stop Centers are suggested as centralized locations for all services and disaster recovery-related information and located in neighborhoods for ease of access.